

ASA Newsletter

News & events of the Assamese people living around the world

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Save Our Manuscripts, Save Our Culture!

Assam has a treasure trove of hand-written manuscripts from the centuries past spread out all over its geographical territory. Dr. Naren Kalita, a retired Professor of Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan College in Nagaon and a regular consultant to the Sankardev Kalakhetra in Guwahati is the most eminent scholar in current Assam on a special class of these manuscripts, ones that are highly illustrated with paintings that pictorially describe the text in these books. He is in the process of writing a book to be published by the Sankardev Kalakhetra where he summarizes eighty seven such books. He also wrote a book two years ago on this topic with Dr. R.D. Choudhury, Director of the Indian National Museum of New Delhi. The oldest pictorial book he has been able to discover is from mid-to-late 1600s in a Xatra near Rangia. Hundreds of such books have survived the vagaries of a harsh nature including torrential rains and devastating floods, destructive insects and worms in a very humid climate, and unscientific storage for centuries. However, many of these are in the process of slowly but inevitably disintegrating and becoming extinct as the author of this editorial has seen with his own eyes during the past two years. The Assamese residents of North America have undertaken a project to digitally photograph or scan as many manuscripts of distinguished value, whether illustrated or not. The project's initial promoter was Chandan Mahanta of St. Louis and currently, there are several dedicated individuals in the US as well as Assam, including Dr. Naren Kalita who are generously spending their time, energy and money photographing such manuscripts. Finding a manuscript sometimes requires detective work. Most illustrated as well as non-illustrated manuscripts are still in private hands although the Government of Assam, and Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities possess a large number as well. Recently, Babul Gogoi of Guwahati, Prabodh Nath of Nagaon, and the author of this editorial have taken a few thousand digital photographs of several illustrated books in Assam with a high-quality digital camera donated by Samar Gogoi of Omaha, Nebraska. The objective is to photograph at least a hundred such books, create compact disks for each book, and create a high quality Web site. Copies of the CDs will be given to the current owners of the books as well as libraries in Assam, India and the US and elsewhere. The Web site will be designed to showcase this unique aspect of Assam's rich literary history. This editorial invites Assamese individuals around the world, including North America to come forward to make this project a rousing success. Donation in terms of money, useful information, time or any other form are cordially welcome. Individuals in Assam such as the several hundred computer professionals working with the approximately two hundred Community Information Centers (CICs) in each administrative Block of Assam are in a particularly advantageous position to assist with information as well photograph taking. There are many extremely rich individuals in Assam today and financial help from such individuals will be very welcome. It's not a project of Assamese resident of North America, but an all-inclusive project that seeks to engage all willing and generous individuals from around the globe. Editorial writers in newspapers and magazines as well scholars in Assam's universities, colleges and other institutions are also in a particularly strong position to help in a tremendous way. This editorial seeks to arouse the interest of everyone in detailing and saving this aspect of Assam's culture and heritage. Please contact the editorial writer if you would like to help in any way.

Jugal Kalita (kalita@pikespeak.uccs.edu)



*This is one out of approximately 300 illustrated pages from the book **Haribannsha** from the late 17th century, currently in possession of Kadami Bora, Retired Teacher, of Roha Sokial Gaon of Chaparmukh, Nagaon District, Assam.*

A number of innovative games and events were organized on the occasion, for children and adults, which witnessed the participation of one and all present.

An exhibition of traditional Assamese Jewellery and Assamese Silk dresses also was organized at the venue of the function; the items on display were brought to Dubai by Sri Dipak Bora of *Asomiya Gohonalya*, Nagaon. Sri Bora had come to Dubai to take part in the ongoing Dubai Shopping Festival, 2004.

- Contributed by D. K. Borah for Assam Society, Dubai

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Magh Bihu Celebrations in New Delhi

Members of the Assam Association, Delhi celebrated Magh Bihu festival with associated fervour on 18th January, 2004 Sunday at the Central Secretariat Sports Grounds in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi. It was participated by a huge gathering, despite the biting cold wave and the concurrent One Day International between India and Australia. This is one celebration, everyone in Delhi looks forward to.



The most interesting part of the Delhi *Magh bihu* is *uruka*. The association organizes food for about a thousand participants, which needs to be prepared overnight. On the eve the hard working citizenry gather around the bonfire and enjoy the heat rays. Grilled sweet potatoes etc. make the rounds, while the chefs exhibit their culinary skills to prepare, *tenga mash*, *labra*, *kalia*, *murhi ghanta*, *bengena fry*, *mutton curry* etc.



In the morning the function started with the hoisting of the association's flag. The air was filled with patriotic renderings of "*O mor apunar desh*"- literally meaning *Oh! My own country*- the national song of Assam. The flag was hoisted by the Vice- President of the Association, Dr. Ranjit Baruah. Next was the lighting of the "*meji*"- the pyre made of firewood. Dr. Hemeswar Dihingia, the senior most citizen present, lit the "*meji*" amidst the resounding "*dhols*" and cymbals. Members of the Association prayed before the fire for the well being of the people and a quick end to the biting cold. It was a grand initiation of the gennext to the rich cultural heritage of Assam.

The newsletter of the Association *Samayik* was released by Dr. Rabin Dev Choudhury, Director General of the National Museum. He expressed happiness at the publication of the magazine without a break and hoped for its prosperity.



The day was also the annual sports day and a number of competitions were being held like Children's Painting Competition, athletic events for Boys, Girls, Ladies, Gents, Youth and elderly etc.

The tiring souls were treated to a gourmet lunch, which had all the flavours of back home.

The day ended with a cultural programme, impromptu bihu dance followed by *tambola* in the evening, finishing with evening tea.

- Contributed by *Manoj Kumar Das, General Secretary, Assam Association, Delhi, India*

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NGO Focus

In recent days, there are many NGOs focusing Assam in a big way. Many of them has started very good project. NGOs can speak to - and speak for - the poor, the disenfranchised, the minorities and others in society to make sure that the needs and desires of the people are heard and responded to by development institutions at the national and international level. NGOs also serve an important role as "watchdogs" - pointing out where governments and corporations need to improve their performances, and serving to enforce the operation of checks and balances that characterize democratic society. Out of these "Mission Together" of UK is one. For more information visit

Mission Together

<http://www.missiontogether.org.uk>

With their motto '**Children Helping Children**', **Mission Together** encourages a concern for children world-wide through prayer, learning activities and fund-raising in Catholic primary schools.

Once our children realise the wretched situations faced by two-thirds of the people in our world, they are anxious to share and give generously. Their gift is used to provide food, medicine clean water, shelter and education for needy children. Taking the holistic approach, however, the Society also encourages spiritual development by promoting pastoral and catechetical projects.

Address:

**23, Eccleston Square
London
SW1V 1NU**

**Harambee Cottage
3 Old School Lane
Calow, Chesterfield, S44 5UE**

Bread & Water

<http://www.breadandwater.org>

Bread&Water was founded in 1999 by a group of young professionals in the New York City area who sought to use every means they had to improve the condition of the needy and the destitute. Today, we are a fast growing non-profit, providing relief in a increasing number of countries around the world, and are still entirely run by volunteers.



Bread & Water has taken a project called "School for Disadvantaged Nepali Children" in Assam. Project details:

Type: Education, Shelter, Food
Location: Assam, India
Organization: Himalayan Ministries

Description: This project seeks to give severely disadvantaged Nepali children a chance to gain a quality education. As a result of ethnic discrimination, poverty and illiteracy is widespread among the Nepalis in Assam. The NBAA school extends beyond ethnic and religious barriers to offer Nepali children from Kindergarten to 10th grade the chance for an education alongside their non-Nepali peers. Despite the school's great financial setbacks, NBAA's students have been among the top students in the area.

ASHA

<http://www.ashanet.org>

Asha for Education(TM)
P.O. Box 322
New York, NY - 10024-0322

How it Started

In the summer of 1991, a few students including V.J.P.Srivatsavoy[@], D. Gupta[#], and S. Pandey* got together to think of ways in which they could play a role in the development of India, the country of their origin. These young people shared the belief that education is a critical requisite and an effective catalyst for social and economic change in India. Basic education became the agenda for the action group that emerged from this gathering. The group was named Asha to represent the hope that had brought these individuals together and the hope that they aimed to bring into the lives of children in India. In that summer of 1991, Asha was born at the University of California in Berkeley.

The Beginnings by V.J.P.Srivatsavoy: Writeup about Asha's history

@ V.J.P.Srivatsavoy was working in India with Unilever, Mumbai. He passed away in May 2000. Please read the article about our late founder - Remembering Sri.

Deepak Gupta is currently a Professor at IIT, Kanpur and continues to be involved with Asha in shaping its vision.

* S. Pandey is currently in India and is devoted to grass roots work full time.

Project: Asha Darshan - Assam

Location: Nalbari District, ASSAM

Project Description:

This is an Asha Stars project under the Asha SV chapter. The objective is to provide adequate resources to support salaries of organizers, teachers and equipments for the organization. The funds are mainly to support the teachers and staff in the project who will be involved in running the balwadis and SHGs for the women and children in this region. Education proposed is informal.

Project: ACRD

Localton: Kamrup District, ASSAM

Project Description:

This is an Asha Stars project under the Asha Stamford chapter. The objective is to provide adequate resources to support the construction and extension of school buildings in Bonpura Lower Primary and Nartap High School in Assam's Kamrup district. Both schools are "venture" schools, which until now have been entirely supported by the local communities. Once the infrastructure is in place,

ASHA hopes to support the schools in terms of salaries for the teachers. Ultimately, ASHA has a vision of working with ACRD and the school management committees to set up vocational training and income generating activities in the schools which will make them self reliant. Presently, the education imparted is formal and the schools follow the state education board's curriculum.

Project: Kokila Vikas Ashram

Location: Gohpur, Sonitpur District, ASSAM

Project Description:

Location of the project is in the area inhabited by Bodo tribes and other scheduled caste and backward population. The area is affected by the Bodo militants who are fighting for autonomy. The schools run by the government are not sufficient, so the villagers themselves run schools in different villages. They form local committees for this purpose. These committees collect donations from the villagers to pay nominal salaries to the teachers. They also construct temporary bamboo walled shed for the school with thatched roof. In this project it is proposed to provide some furniture, reading and playing materials to 9 such schools run in the area. It is also proposed to replace the thatched roof with G.C.I. sheet.

Project: Shanti Sadhana Ashram

Location: Guwahati, Kamrup District, ASSAM

Project Description:

Locations of the Schools: The Jeevan Sadhana Vidya Niketans (JSVNs) of Shanti Sadhana Ashram have been running schools in 4 districts of Assam (Kamrup, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Nalbari) that fall under 4 Development Blocks of Dimoria, Pachim Abhaypur, Narayanpur and Tamulpur. All the schools are located in rural backward areas and cover children from at least 3-4 nearby villages.

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My visit to Oxom

I came back from Assam about two weeks back with a lot of sweet memories and am still musing on them. Apart from visiting my own relatives and seeing places, I had in mind to meet activists of some NGOs who have been doing good work. I fulfilled my objectives. Below is a short write-up of my brief meeting with them.

I had a prearrange meeting with the **State Resource Center, Assam** (Address: SRC, Phone: (0361) 2517230, Email: srcassam@hotmail.com) and the **Society for Promotion of Appropriate Development Efforts** (Address: SPADE, Phone: (0361) 2666169, 2482515, 2551345, 2638675, e-mail indranee15@hotmail.com), both are based in Guwahati.

The **SRC** is helping other NGOs who are working with the rural people to uplift their standard of living. They work at the grass root level and to bring self-confident to each and every people is their main objective. They try to achieve this through adult education and Gramin Bank concept and are very successful at that. They have developed so much confidence in their ability that they don't wait for the Government to do some developmental work in the village. SRC is trying to be self-sufficient in all aspects.

The **SPADE**, a voluntary organization of NE, was formed in 1994 & registered under the Society Registration Act XXI of 1860. The SPADE is run by few concerned citizens of Guwahati with voluntary zeal. They are from different professions. Their aim was to promote and support sustainable people's development initiatives in backward rural areas of Assam. Up till now they took part in Community

Development Program, Program for Empowerment of Rural Women, Adult Literacy Program for Women, Construction of a Community cum Resource Center, “Mahila Vikash Kendra“, Flood Relief Program, Support for Income Generation Activity, Rural Sanitation Program, Tree Plantation Program and Capacity and Skill Development Program. At present they have taken up a Project on Residential Center for Development of Women “ SARATHI “ in Guwahati where all distressed women will have opportunity to develop their potential skill and enable them to earn living in a dignified manner.

Their target is the development of “woman in distress” groups like domestic attendants, construction workers, and cleaners etc. who have no chance to acquire knowledge or to develop themselves. With little or no education; poor economic condition and family pressure pushes them to literally live on the streets. Most of these become domestic attendants, helpers and in many cases adopt prostitutions by force out a living.

“ The project proposes to conduct long-term residential programs for the target group in a phase by phase manner. Creating in-house facility is necessary to impart training and much needed sustainability of the program. The project will also assist the target group in getting employment or to consider self-employment. It will also provide a continuous support base with hostel facilities and necessary guidance. The successful trainees will be provided hostel facilities for one or one and a half years. This will help them acclimatize to the new urban environment. The development of a skilled and organized labor force with continuous upgrading skill will enable to live with dignity and self-confidence. “ Without any external help this project can never be materialized.

Xankardev Xishu Niketan, Morowa, 1995

I also visited Xankar Dev Xishu Niketan, a primary school in Morowa village about 5 miles from Nalbari. This school is built solely on public donations and at present instructs at the primary level. Apart from academic curricula, the kids are taught music, dance, discipline and cleanliness. Discipline and cleanliness are two most important qualities of progressive society. I was amazed to see how these rural people have understood the importance of these and started teaching in the grass root level. We really have lot to learn from them.

Workshop at Bagta Village

Lastly I went to visit the workshop that has been developed by my friend Dr. Benoy Das in a village called Bagta about 15 miles from Guwahati. He and his wife, Aradhana had to sacrifice lot of their urban comfort to do this project. Dr. Das was in Vietnam for 4 years working with UNICEF on improvement of sanitation in rural areas and especially in schools. He was tied with UNICEF in India too with a same kind of project. During that period he developed low cost latrines, urinals and bathrooms using only harvested rainwater. A number of schools in rural areas had constructed these facilities and they are happy with the outcome.

What I noticed in his workshop and the compound was nothing but the simplest form of sanitary latrine components having a RCC slab, fitted with mosaic pan and trap, and a PVC pipe to run to a covered earthen pit (functioning as a septic tank). There are three models with costs ranging Rs.800.00 (earthen pit) to Rs.1, 200 (RCC round septic tank) and Rs.1, 800 (RCC round septic tank and water reservoir). After educating the villagers around, he plans to distribute these among them. Before distribution he also plans to give a demonstration on how to build those by the villagers themselves. We wish them all success for this great project. I will write on this project later. I have a Project Report prepared by him and if anybody wants to do something for his or her village school, I will be glad to give a copy of the Project Report.

- *Contributed by Mahesh Baishya, NJ, USA*

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Revitalization of local clubs – micro credit, a way out

Raju is a Muslim boy of about 30 years of age, although he looks older than his age. Everyday the boys in the club noticed that Raju is out in the street early in the morning and then almost the last person to leave – with his rickshaw. It is not his rickshaw but the local Mahajan's to whom he has to pay Rs 20 a day. The rickshaw is very old and rickety but there is no way out. Then things changed one day. The club received a loan from a Financial Institution to help people like Raju. Raju was told that if he could give the club Rs 20 everyday it could buy a new rickshaw for him. Moreover, after the total amount was repaid the rickshaw would be his. Raju jumped at the idea. He did not care to know that interest charged would be 18% per annum.

With new rickshaw Raju's earnings increased. Plus, he began to save much more to repay the loan to the club. In less than a year he became a proud owner of a rickshaw.

He did not stop there. Next he requested the club to give him another rickshaw. Surprised the secretary asked him why he would need another rickshaw. He said that all his life he was somebody else's employee. Now he would like to be an employer. With his repayment record hardly anybody, except the commercial banks in Assam, could refuse him. He was given another rickshaw. The very next year he took a loan from the same club, this time for a auto van. Last heard, he was planning to buy a mini truck. All this within a span of three years. And with the help of micro credit.

The above story is of a person from Sipajhar and the club is Sipajhar Diamond club, established in 1933. NEDFi has been assisting the club. There are lots of local clubs like these all over the NE region. The people managing these clubs need to be guided and then funded to this sort of work. These are the pillars on which the development of the society can rest. So when do we start?

- *Contributed by Amiya Sharma, DGM (Economist), NEDFi, Guwahati, India*

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NRA Meeting to be held on January 7th and 8th in 2005

The Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon organizing committee held its first meeting in Guwahati at a city hotel on Friday, the 16th January 2004. The Xonmilon is an attempt by well-meaning and resourceful individuals in Assam to officially engage with Assam's strong diaspora to facilitate rejuvenation Assam's bond with those around the world. Mr. Jatin Hazarika, the President of the Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon gave an inaugural speech and welcomed the Non-resident Assamese (NRA) present from the USA and the UK. Mr. Chiranjeet Chaliha, the President of the Northeast Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NECCI) welcomed the NRAs for their support of the Xonmilon and urged them to do the utmost to acquaint the people of Assam with the depth and variety of experiences and achievements of the Assamese diaspora has been able to garner. He also briefly described Assam's problems with regards to technical and business development and the expectations the mother country has of the NRA and the level of support Assam can provide to the NRA in case they want to engage in business activities in Assam.

Jugal Kalita, a professor in Computer Science from Colorado urged the people of Assam to understand the sentiments of the NRAs about Assam, the expenses they have to incur just to travel to Assam and the difficulties of the bureaucratic procedures in Assam. He requested the Organizing Committee's members in Assam who are very influential to impress upon the Government of Assam to develop a policy framework for creating a more conducive environment for the sustained and productive business interaction of the NRAs with Assam and its people. He mentioned that many NRA technical professionals have dreams of starting small-scale IT technology centers in Assam for mutual benefit of the people of Assam and the associated NRA individuals, and he is confident they will come forward if the environment is opportune for them.

Umesh Tahbildar, the President of the Devee Engineer LLC, New Jersey suggested the importance of promoting manufacturing in Assam. He mentioned that lately Assam has done well in the field of medicine by having established several high-quality hospitals that are drawing patients from Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and elsewhere. However, Assam lags far behind in manufacturing. He also mentioned the need for small hydro-electric power generation projects and the looming Riverlinking Project started by the Government of India as well the proposed damming of the Brahmaputra in Tibet. He requested that the people of Assam be very vigilant about the designs of the Indian and Chinese Governments. Dilip Dutta, Professor in Mathematics of Rhode Island University asked the people of Assam to liaise with the NRA who are experts in their individual fields and visit Assam on a regular basis. He suggested that talks and other types of interactions be organized by the Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon Committee whenever such individuals visit Assam. Baroda Sharma from USA, said that he is the Chairman of Assam Convention organized by the Assam Association of North America and he offered his willingness to publicize the information for the 2005 NRA meeting during the Assam Convention in the USA.

Samudra Sharma a Consultant Psychiatrist and his wife Anima Sharma from Scotland offered their support for the next meeting in the year 2005. Lily Das Malik from London said that the Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon should be celebrated in an attractive way just like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. Rini Kakati from London emphasized the interest of the NRA from the UK who are mostly doctors. Among them are Jadumoni Bora, Nagen Sarmah and Nilmoni Sikdar who had sent some valuable suggestions for the benefit of the state in areas such as Tourism and Health Care. Karuna Das, a physician from the UK was also present in the meeting.

Rini Kakati thanked Bibhuti Bhusan Barthakur, General Secretary and Manas Deka, Organizing Secretary for their hard work and sincerity in making the 2004 NRA meeting a success.

It was decided that the next Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon will be held on the 7th and 8th (Friday and Saturday) of January, 2005. It was also decided that a Web site will be developed for the NRA Xonmilon of 2005 to communicate with those wishing to attend. The objective of the 2005 Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon was agreed upon as the following:

The objective of the proposed Probaxi Oxomiya Xonmilon of 2005 is to establish channels of communication among the technical and business leaders of Assam, the NRI from Assam, and those residents of Assam living outside Assam within India, with a view to discussing creative ideas to facilitate implementation of projects towards economic and industrial development of Assam.

The topics to be discussed in NRA Xonmilon, 2005 will be 1) Health Care 2) Tourism, 3) Agro-based Businesses, 4) Urban Development, 5) Education and 6) Information Technology/Biotechnology.

- Contributed by Rini Kakati of London and Guwahati

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Tips for teaching good manners

Work on one thing at a time. If you try to teach too many social skills at once, you will end up teaching none of them well.

Praise your children for their successes. When your kids display proper manners at home or in public, give them immediate positive feedback.

Be tolerant of your children's lapses, but do not overlook them. Children will make mistakes. The more patient you are, the more progress they will ultimately make.

When it's obvious that your child has forgotten a certain social ritual, give a prompt. If, for example, your child forgets to extend his or her hand upon meeting an adult, quietly ask, "What are we supposed to do when we meet

someone older than ourselves?" That gives the child the opportunity to do the right thing without feeling he or she is being criticized.

Last, but not least, set a good example. A "do as I say, not as I do" approach to manners simply won't work. And by the way, manners are not a one-way street. If you want your children to behave in a mannerly way toward you, then you must behave in a mannerly way toward them as well.

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Tips for finding your college

How can you find colleges that match your needs? First identify your priorities. Next, carefully research the characteristics of a range of schools. Finally, match the two. Here are some college characteristics that you should consider.

Size of the student body

Size will affect many of your opportunities and experiences, including:

- Range of academic major offered.
- Extracurricular possibilities.
- Amount of personal attention that you will receive.
- Number of books in the library.

When considering the size, be very sure to look beyond the raw number of student attending. For example you are considering a small department within a large school. Investigate, not just the number of faculty, but also how accessible faculty members are to students.

Location:

Do you want to visit home frequently, or do you see this as a time to experience a new part of the country? Perhaps you like an urban environment with access to museums, ethnic food, or major league ball games. Or maybe you hope for easy access to the outdoors or peacefulness of a small town.

Academic Programs:

If you know what you want to study, research reputations of academic departments by talking to people in the fields that interest you. If you are undecided, relax and pick an academically balanced institution that offers a range of majors and programs. Most colleges offer counseling to help you find a focus.

In considering academic programs, look for special opportunities and pick a school that offer many possibilities.

Campus Life:

Consider what your college life will be like beyond the classroom, Aim for a balance between academics, activities and social life. Before choosing a college, learn the answers to these questions:

What extracurricular activities, athletics, activities and special interest groups are available?

- Does the community around the college offer interesting outlets for students?
- Are students welcomed by the community?
- Is there ethnic or religious in which to take part?
- How do fraternities and sororities influence campus life?
- Is housing guaranteed?
- How are dorms assigned?

Cost:

Today's college price tag makes cost an important consideration for most students. At the same time, virtually all college work to ensure that academically qualified students from very economic circumstance can find financial aid that allows them to attend. While considering cost, look beyond the price tag.

Diversity:

Explore what you might gain from a diverse student body. Think about the geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of the students as a means of learning more about the world. Investigate what kinds of student organizations or other groups with ethnic or religious foundations are active and visible on campus.

Retention and graduation rates:

One of the best ways to measure a school's quality and the satisfaction of its students is to learn the percent of students who return after the first year and the percent of entering students who remain to graduate. Comparatively good retention and graduation rates are indicators that responsible academic, social and financial support systems exist for most students.

For more information visit <http://www.collegeboard.com>

- *Compiled by Satyam K Bhuyan, Ames, Iowa, USA from various sources.*

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A Comparison of the US and Indian Economies: Some Key Observations

This write-up deals with a topic that has received a lot of attention of the economic thinkers, researchers and students in economics in recent years. The study of comparative economics provides us with some interesting facts that reflect not only the present status of the economies, but also provides insights about how they would look several years from today. In the presentation today, I will quote illustrative data about the US and Indian economies to depict pictures of similarities and differences between them. The figures that I would liberally quote may not be exact, but I am sure that they are reasonably correct. In this context, I will talk about per capita incomes, sizes of companies, the culture of credit or of borrowing, small businesses and a host of other topics within the broad field of economics. You may have heard or read a lot about the high-tech industry in the US, especially during the recent years. Though, I will mention the high tech industry, my focus will not be on that alone. I work in the field of marketing in a financial services company and thus you will see a focus on finances and matters related to money.

Relative sizes of the two economies

The US GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is nearly \$10,000 billions (\$B) while that of India is only \$400B at nominal prices and \$1,500B when purchasing power parity (PPP) is considered. In PPP terms, China is the second largest economy with nearly \$5,000B of GDP. Japan comes next with a GDP of \$4,500B followed by Germany (\$2,200B). However, when you look at per capita incomes, the story is quite different. The citizens of developed countries enjoy per capita incomes that are many times those of their unfortunate counterparts in the developing countries. Per person income in the US per year is over \$30,000 while that of an Indian is about \$400 or less than Rs. 20,000.

The average price of a car in the US is about \$20,000 or slightly over Rs 900,000. In India, low-end Marutis sell for about Rs. 240,000. I am giving you the approximate prices in the two countries. Now, you see the reason why cars are still unaffordable to the vast majority of Indians while they are highly so to an American. Yes, it is true that Indians are buying cars in ever-larger numbers. But, when you compare with

developed countries, car ownership as a percent of the population is still extremely low. In India, the car sales during the last three years have been about 550,000 per year. But, please do not jump out of your seat if I tell you that sale of cars in the US averages about 18,000,000 a year – about 30 times in India. Yes, the car sales are that high. The sales of trucks in India are about 125,000 a year – in the US they are nearly 2,000,000 per year, about 16 times. The per capita differences are several times higher since the population of the US at 290 millions is less than a 1/3rd of India's. Of course, India has made a lot of strides during the recent past. It started with the liberalization of the economy in 1991. However, she has a long way to go.

Though, the average price of a car seems higher in the US, they are generally roomier than the cars sold in India. However, sizes of cars sold in India compare much more favorably with those sold in Japan, Korea and Europe. In this respect, the US is an aberration. Since, parking is not much of a problem in the US, except in large cities, Americans prefer large cars. But, I am trying to make a different point here. An average American can buy a car with about 8 months of his annual pay while an average Indian even now needs to save for 12 years (the average income, according to Malayalam Manorama is less than Rs. 20,000). There lies the big difference. Cars in the US are lot more affordable to its residents. That is why they can buy cars in such large numbers.

Prices of cars and average incomes in India and the US*			
	Price of a car	Average per capita income	# of years to work to buy a car
India	Rs. 240,000	Rs. 20,000	12 years
US	Rs. 900,000 (\$20,000)	Rs. 1,350,000 (\$30,000)	8 months

To give you other examples, an American can buy a small TV, priced at \$150 with less than two day's pay. She can buy a 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola at about \$1 with less than what she earns by working just 10 minutes. In India, at Rs. 42, for the same two-liter bottle, an average citizen has to work for several hours.

I just read that the number of motorcycles sold in India last year was 3,900,000. Now, that is a very respectable number. I do not have comparative figures for the US – but I will guess that the sales of motorcycles there will be less than a million units per year. In that country, motorcycles are used for fun and not for real commuting. During the summer months, on days when the temperature goes to 30C or higher, Americans like to take rides on their bikes, as they call them. If you drive along highways on such warm days, often you will see groups of both men and women taking pleasure rides on their bikes. On a few occasions, I have seen thousands of bikers all riding closely together. Many of these motorcycle enthusiasts are hippies or their variants and they are just enjoying the warm summer days of which there is a short supply in most parts of that country.

Growth rates of economies

My readings suggest that the Indian GDP has been growing at a healthy clip of 6.0% to 6.5% over the last several years. This compares quite favorably with the growth rate of 2.0% to 2.5% experienced by the US in a typical year. China has, however, done even better than India with a pace of growth of 8% to 9% annually.

Let's pause for a minute and try to understand the impact of these different growth rates. As I mentioned earlier, the Indian economy in PPP terms is about \$1,500B while the US GDP stands at \$10,000B or \$1 trillion. As far as the US is concerned, you should note that there is no difference between the PPP and nominal GDP since both are measured in the same currency, i.e., the dollar. Given the growth rates that I cited, the Chinese economy would still be smaller that of the US in another ten years, but by only a small

margin (\$11,837B for China versus \$13,439 for the US). If it can continue with the momentum and keep growing at the same pace, in another twenty years it will be the biggest economy in the world – it will dwarf the US with a size of the economy that will be at least 1.5 times of the former!

China is currently on the throes of becoming a superpower in terms of size of its overall economy. By all historical accounts it was a superpower till the 17th century when the ascent of the western economies took off at the dawn of the industrial revolution and with the conquests of vast regions of the world by these countries as colonies or vassal states. China is all set to regain its glorious status of the distant past barring any cataclysmic events like a devastating earthquake or a destructive nuclear war with the US over the control of Taiwan.

Comparative GDPs of India, China and the US 10 and 20 years from today.				
	Current GDP (\$B)	CAGR	GDP in 10 years (\$B)	GDP in 20 years (\$B)
India	\$1,500	6%	\$2,686	\$4,811
China	\$5,000	9%	\$11,837	\$28,022
US	\$10,000	3%	\$13,439	\$18,061

But, India does not do as well by my calculations. At a 6% annual growth rate, the Indian economy will grow from its current size, which is 1/7th of that of the US to 1/5th in ten years and 1/4rd in twenty years.

Do you see how much of a difference a mere 3% growth rate makes when compounded over a long horizon? So, what do you think India ought to do to become a world power in 10 or 20 years? You guessed it right; though 6% CAGR (compounded annual growth rates) is highly respectable, it is not nearly enough. Our motherland has to strive to expand her economy at an annual rate of 9% or 10%, and maybe even higher. That perhaps is an arduous task, but definitely not an impossible one. China has achieved such a high growth rate during the recent past, and the so-called Asian Tigers like South Korea expanded at even higher CAGRs during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. But, the policy makers at the helm of the government ministries and the Reserve Bank of India need to be extra careful. Such a high rate of expansion may lead to an overheating of the economy and a high rate of inflation. Monetary and fiscal policies will need to be coordinated well – the massive budget deficit of 10% or higher that we see now will have to cut to more reasonable levels. Even having a disciplined monetary and fiscal policy will not be sufficient – fundamental changes to the judicial and social systems have to boldly brought about for this to happen during our lifetimes.

Relative sizes of companies in the two countries

Do you know which is the largest company in the US and how does it compare with the largest firm in India in terms of revenues? Do you know if this largest US company is a high-tech company, a bank, a wholesaler, a retailer or a pharmaceutical company?

Wal-Mart, a retailer-cum-wholesaler is the largest company in the US. In fact, it is the largest firm in the world with an annual sales of \$240B or Rs. 1,080,000 crores. Daily sales of Wal-Mart on certain good days - like the black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving celebration in November when throngs of shoppers make runs on retail stores to buy all they can lay their hands on for Christmas and New Year's gifts exceeds \$1.5B or Rs. 6,750 crores. On the Indian side, the firm with the largest sales in 2002 was Reliance with Rs. 58,000 crores of revenues. This amounts to only \$13B. Thus, Reliance is only 1/18th the size of Wal-Mart. Do you see the large difference in scale?

Wal-Mart has about 2,200 stores in the US and a few hundred more in countries like the UK, Germany and now even China. It has not entered India yet to open its outlet, but I am sure it is starting to eye India with increasing inquisitiveness. Each of its 2,200 stores is as large as two or three football fields. In most of these stores, you can buy everything from potatoes, onions and milk to medicines to TVs to clothes under the immense expanse of the retail floor with rows upon rows of goods from all over the world. Each store is like a decent size Indian bazaar, except that there are no walls that separate the stores within. These stores normally look like big boxes – there are doors in the front for shoppers to enter and leave with the big bags stuffed with goods of their liking. The back doors are used by the suppliers and employees. There are no windows on any of the sides – but because there is air-conditioning and adequate lighting all the time, a shopper does not feel that he is inside a big box. Companies with stores of this type, which are also referred to as category killers in marketing parlance, offer goods at low prices since they wield enormous power with vendors. Wal-Mart, for example, scours the world, including India to get its products at the best price.

Can you guess which is the foreign country from which Wal-Mart imports the products that it offers for sales at prices that most other stores find it utterly difficult to compete against? Many of you may have guessed it right – it gets \$15B of products from China every year. The US imports over \$150B of goods from China and Wal-Mart by itself accounts for about 1/10th of this huge trade activity. This company alone accounts for over 2% of the US GDP. Wal-Mart is not a high technology or computer company in the sense that its focus is not on producing or marketing or selling high tech goods. It, however, has an extremely sophisticated computer based inventory control system, which helps it lower cost to a bare minimum. The computer system enables it to send particular goods to its stores from its many warehouses using its huge fleet of trucks as and when there is an anticipated demand for them. The system automatically sends orders to vendors based on forecasted demand and the stocks at hand. No other retail network in the US has come closer to the level of perfection that Wal-Mart has achieved through this smart computer based control of its inventory. Do not forget that the US is a large country with a geographic size that will be nearly three times that of India and supplying all of its 2,000 odd stores with goods in an optimal way is a stupendous task.

The next largest companies in the US in terms of sales are car manufacturers like General Motors and Ford, followed by petroleum refiners and marketers like Exxon. The largest high-tech company is IBM with annual sales of \$70B. Microsoft, of which you hear so much in the media, has sales of no more than \$35B. The picture is somewhat different when you look at profits and market values of companies - a few high-tech companies like Microsoft, Intel and Cisco fare very well against their old-world counterparts on these measures.

Small business and entrepreneurship

In both India and the US, small businesses employ bulk of the workforce. In the US, there are about 2,500,000 small businesses that employ two or more individuals. On the other hand, there are only 5,000 odd companies that trade on the stock markets. (If you include 1-person enterprises like Amway and Mary Kay salesperson, the number of businesses will be several times higher than the 2.5 million.) Though, the US went through a recession recently and the largest firms laid off a lot of employees during its wake, small businesses, in general, have continued to grow both in their numbers and the size of the workforce.

But, the above statistics should not lull you into thinking that all small businesses that are started in the US ultimately survive and do well. That is absolutely wrong. In my work at Merrill Lynch, we are increasingly dealing with small businesses. Such small businesses are prone to high failure rates even in the US. Only 1 in 5 or 6 businesses that are started ever survive.

I would assume that the number of small businesses in India is a lot higher than in the US. The failure rate among these small firms will be also as high as that in the US or even higher. Stores in India tend to be so much smaller and independent as opposed to being parts of chains. A Wal-Mart may be equivalent to 100 or more typical Indian stores.

There are many other companies with stores that are comparable to Wal-Mart in size though their total annual revenues may be lower. There is a chain of hardware stores called Home Depot whose stores that are equally big. Home Depots carry not only nails, screws, bricks and hammers – but also lawn mowers, air conditioners, refrigerators and even small homes or sheds. If you order an 8’X10’ shed for your backyard, its crew can come and install it for you in the next few days.

There are some groups of Indians who are doing quite well in business in the US. One such group is Gujratis – especially those with the last name of Patels. These Indians own nearly 50% of the 35,000–40,000 small hotels in that country. Such hotels are officially called motels – a word that is a cross between motorcars and hotels. They are located along the highways and their main arteries. Travelers of all kinds, but mostly those who are driving to somewhat distant places in their motorcars stay in them during nights. The entire family of the Gujrati owner, including the wife, children, and often, elderly parents work in them. The US-born children of these owners are now expanding their parents’ businesses by buying larger hotels like Holiday Inns and Radissons, thus moving up the food chain.

Millionaire next door

A few years ago, a popular book on the wealthy households in the US was published in that country. In that book called, “Millionaire Next Door”, the authors, two professors at business schools, found through their research that there were 4,5000,000 households with net worth of a million dollars or more each. Net worth is the difference between the value of properties that a household owns and the loans that are outstanding. A million dollars at the current exchange rate is about Rs. 4.6 crores.

The gist of their research is that over 70% of those who have made in the US, i.e., are millionaires, have become so through founding of successful businesses. The rest 30% have become rich through their jobs or through inheritance. These 70% rich business owners do not often own high profile or even interesting businesses. They own hardware stores, laundromats or dry-cleaning stores, small electrical stores, businesses that clean peoples’ gutters, paint homes, perform maintenance of machines and repair broken roofs. These millionaire business owners tend to be spendthrift and live in smaller houses than they can afford; buy cheaper cars than they can buy with the money they have. That is why Professor Stanley refers to them as ‘millionaires next door’ – that is, you can’t figure out that they are that wealthy just by looking at their homes and cars. On the other hand, the professor says that there are many high-income lawyers and doctors, (who can also be considered to be independent businessman,) who buy expensive cars and huge homes with jumbo loans and have to struggle to pay those loans back. They are not millionaires when you subtract the outstanding value of their loans from the value of the assets that they possess.

I have read this book more than once. It is a very interesting book. What impressed me the most is that many of those interviewed for the book say that they had to struggle in the beginning. In many instances, their first or even second attempts at business building failed. But they persisted and with some luck they thrived. There is an important lesson for Indians and Assamese from this book. Entrepreneurship pays in the long run. But do not be assured of success right at the outset – you will have to struggle for sometime.

Culture of borrowing

Over 90% of Americans borrow from banks to buy their cars and build their homes. This helps them own homes when they are in their 30s and 40s, instead of having to wait till their retirement to enjoy them. This leads to an expansion of the economy – the ample use of credit enables millions of families who otherwise can not buy a car or a home, to get a piece of the American dream. Someone has to produce these cars and build those homes. The multiplier effect that one learns in a basic microeconomic class causes the economy to expand when consumers purchase using borrowed money. This is an important reason why 18 million cars sell annually in that country. I would hazard a guess and say that car sales would not have exceeded 6

or 8 millions per year if American were to pay cash to acquire them. Home sales will also be a lot fewer than what they are now.

Almost every adult American owns 3 or 4 credit cards. When they go to stores to buy expensive goods, most often they do not carry bundles of cash in their pockets. Only people, I know who carry wads of dollar bills in their pockets are thieves and drug dealers who have difficulty converting their illicit monies into bank deposits. A regular shopper buys goods with one of their plastics and pay later when the credit card company sends them the bills. This helps make life convenient. Banks earn interest on balances.

It is good to see that the concept of borrowing is starting to take roots here as well. Credit culture is good for the economy – but one should not borrow beyond his means and become a slave of banks.

Not everything is fine and dandy

I have given you only the rosy side of the American story so far. However, there are pitfalls in every good thing that ever happens. An average American faces a lot more tension in life than his or her counterpart in India. There are several reasons for that.

First, American have to work a lot harder than most Indians do. An average American spends about 40 hours a week at work, but there are many those who work 50, 60 or 70-hour workweeks. In India, most employees do not work seriously for 30 hours per week. The number of vacation days that employees in most US companies get is no more than two weeks per year. In India / Assam most employees get at least 30 days of personal leave. In addition to the vacation days, there are only 8 holidays during the year like the Independence Day on July 4th and the New Year's Day. In India, the number of holidays runs in to nearly 30 more days.

Secondly, it is extremely expensive to hire household help. In India, those who have the means get others to cook, clean and wash for them. In that country, most people do all of these on their own. Not even dollar millionaires afford to hire help regularly. Of course, machines help them with cleaning and washing – but still all of these take time and could be physically tiring.

Thirdly, one big difference between firms in India and the US is that the latter are ready to quickly shed jobs when the economic times become hard and when profitability is at stake. These are precisely the times when it is difficult for an individual to quickly land another equivalent job. All of these factors create tensions in the lives of the people. Since Americans tend to buy their cars and homes against loans, hard times may lead to confiscation of these properties.

Conclusion and lessons for Assam / India

First of all, having studied in both India and the US, I can confidently say that there is absolutely no difference in the intellectual capacities of students here in Assam / India and the US. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that better schools like the Cotton College compare quite favorably with any school in that country. Now, if there is no difference in intellectual capacities, how does one explain the economic status of the two nations? The answer to lack of Assam's / India's progress lies in the poor judicial and social systems that are prevalent in the country together with pitiable conditions of the infrastructure.

I understand that the state is facing huge budget deficits, but there is no alternative to developing the infrastructure. Roads need to be improved, electricity needs to be produced and distributed, and phone lines need to be connected. And above all, the rule of the law has to be respected and enforced. The right to property has to be respected and upheld in courts. Patent laws need to be abided by and the crooks who copy other people's ideas and technology without paying royalties need to be put behind bars for creativity to flourish. If these basic issues are taken care of, development will follow. Why can the central government

with a standing army of several millions strong utilize them during long periods of peace to build the country's infrastructure? My readings say that when the US built its highway system back in the 50s, military had a big role to play. India can do the same now 50 years later.

For Assam's economy to grow, there is no alternative to developing more industries both large and small. The theory of comparative advantage suggests that Assam should focus on areas that it could do well like agro-based industries, petroleum-based industries and tourism. Many of the sick industries run by the government needs to be privatized for them to become healthy again.

- *Contributed by Jukti Kalita, NJ, USA. This is the text of a lecture given by Mr Kalita at Cotton College on November 7, 2003.*

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New e-group for students of Assam living abroad

A new e-group for students belonging to Assam and who now live outside India was recently formed. This group was initiated by Santonu Goswami of El Paso, Texas and has a reasonably good number of members from US, UK, Bangkok, Europe etc. Here is a welcome message from the members:

Hi,

Welcome to the group "axomiya-students: Assamese Students Abroad". This is a meeting place for the students studying in US, Canada and elsewhere in the world outside India. We have a very small community of Assamese students and we don't have any common ground where we can communicate among ourselves. We need a strong network so that we can know each other and can communicate among ourselves. That way we can also help each other and can get informed about what is going on in other places. I think that really helps. And as we the Assamese students are only a handful, it is very important for all of us to help create this type of network so that we can stand together against any odds that come our way. So let's make this place to be in to meet everybody. Please inform anyone you know who is doing his/her studies not only here in America but around the globe so that he/she can join and can help create a strong network of Assamese students.

To be a part of the enthusiastic group please our website at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/axomiya_students/ or send an e-mail to axomiya_students_subscribe@yahoo.com

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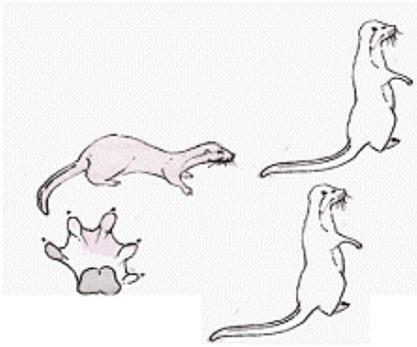
The three otter's birthday

There were three otters. Their names were P B & J, that's short for Peanut, Butter and Jelly.

One day they were very excited because tomorrow was their birthday.



Even though otter pups can live on their own, they often continue to try to nurse, beg for food, or hitch a ride on mom's belly. Otter's Mothers are very tolerant of large pups—up to the point when they wean them.



When it was night, it seemed like it went on forever. Then all of them fell asleep. The next thing they knew they heard their alarm clock was ringing, but it was only in their dream.

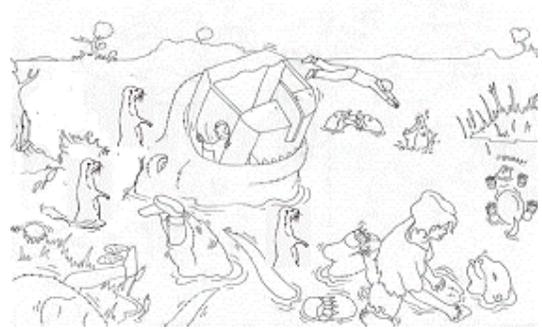
For P, B and J it was a fun dream, they were playing tag.

Then they were playing something else. Suddenly a giant box with a ribbon fell out of the sky. Immediately they woke up. Peanut, Butter and Jelly wanted to play tag.

On their birthday, their Aunt Helga was supposed to come, but she didn't.

In the afternoon, the otters asked their parents why their aunt didn't come why there was not a birthday party.

"What birthday party?" their parent asked.
Your Birthday is tomorrow. So, the sad little otters went to the bed.



The next morning a box was delivered to the little otters and there was a little note on it and it said



"Dear P, B & J, I am going to come in a little while, please don't open the box until I come, Love, Aunt Helga"

"I wonder what is in the box," wondered Peanut.

They tried many things to see through it, like holding it up to the sun, rotating the box up and down and so on. Soon it was broken. P, B and J become very sad.

When Aunt Helga got there, she told them not to be sad. The same thing happened to her when she was little. But always follow what elders say.



The Otters parents fixed the broken box and they lived happily even after.

- Contributed by Miss Niribili (Niky) Sarmah. Niribili is in Grade-III in Amosland Elementary School, 549 Amosland Road, Morton, PA-19070. She hopes children age 6-8 will love to read this story.



CICs and non-resident Assamese can help in State's progress

NAGAON, Feb 7 — The Community Information Centres (CICs) in Assam can be mutual partner with Non-Resident Assamese in building the nation and these centers can be come global community members by participating freely in various global formers, said Dr Jugal K Kalita, associate professor of Computer Science of Colorado State University, USA. Speaking as a chief guest on the 8th of January at CIC, Pakhimoria in Nagaon district, Dr Kalita said that Non-Resident Assamese people now working in USA are always eager to help the land of their origin in various fields, and the CICs in Assam can take the help of the computer experts working in USA in updating themselves. Dr Kalita hoped that the CICs in the State would organize workshops and invite those Non-Resident Assamese, expert in Computer Science, who come to their homeland almost every year to receive technical guidance.

Dr Kalita in his speech told Non-Resident Assamese have small companies in USA where they take projects and these projects are sometimes sent to Assam to be done by skilful persons here and hoped that the talented CIC operators could take this opportunity. Dr Kalita further told the CICs are the best medium to bring an IT revolution in Assam and assured that, if invited by the administration, he and other Non-Resident Assamese would surely help the CICs of Assam.

The workshop was arranged by Jayanta Bora and Smt Saraswati Kashyap CIC Pakhimoria and was attended by operators from all the CICs of Nagaon and six CICs of Lakhimpur district. Sri Arabindo Dutta, district informatics officer, Nagaon and Dibya Dutta, DIO, Lakhimpur, Smt Saswatee Chatterjee, a specialist in Computer Graphics now living in USA, Prof (retd) Deba K Saikia, an eminent playwright and Rama Bora, retired teacher were among others present in the workshop. It may be mentioned here that CIC, Pakhimoria has already prepared a website on the rich cultural heritage and historical importance of Nagaon district and has taken up an ambitious project of preparing a website on Assam.

If any technical or business-oriented individual residing outside Assam including those abroad and those in the highly developed high-tech centers within India such as Bangalore and Hyderabad wishes to talk to the CIC personnel and other individuals in Assam about their technical and business experiences, please contact Jugal Kalita (kalita@pikespeak.uccs.edu) or Dibya Dutta, District Information Officer, North Lakhimpur (a-lakhim@hub.nic.in). We will help you set up a meeting where you can talk about your experiences to a technically savvy group of individuals in Assam. There are approximately 200 CICs in Assam, and about 400 in all of the Northeast. A CIC has several PCs that have high speed Internet connection. The purpose of establishing the CICs is to bring about a high-tech revolution in the Northeast, primarily in the rural areas. There is one CIC in every administrative Block and they are usually situated in a Higher Secondary School or College campus. Each CIC is manned by two technically well-trained individuals. Many are B.E.s, M.E.s, M.C.As. All others have a Bachelors or Masters Degree

- *Contributed by Jayanta Bora and Saraswatee Kashyap, Nagaon (part of this report was published in the Assam Tribune on the 8th of February, 2004)*

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Assamese Movies and the Andalusian Dog

“Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all...I have always been amazed at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to waking events than to those occurring in dreams...

Man... is above all the plaything of his memory. In the world we live in everything militates in favor of things that have not yet happened, of things that will never happen again.”

-- Andre Breton

The Assamese movie scene has always been plagued by the lack of funds and invariably so because of the limited number of Assamese speakers. One cannot compare Assam to Mumbai, leave alone Hollywood,

since the special effects, editing, costumes, location and every small technical detail, which are the hallmark of successful commercial movies, involve a lot of money. And since not many are going to watch the Assamese movies, it is difficult to make expensive productions. But there is the realm of the experimental or avant-garde cinema, which is still unexplored by Assamese directors. Avant-garde cinema does not require a huge budget; all it requires is a fresh set of eyes to look at reality in a unique manner and the talent to interpret it through images on the reel.

The avant-garde movement does not restrict itself to movie making: it is a new way of looking at reality- a new way of training one's senses to interpret reality. The avant-garde tried to experiment with various interpretations of space, time, image, color etc. In fact almost all the abstract art(with the exception of surrealism and lettrisme) was conceived in the realm painting and then was applied in literature, movie-making, music etc.

Surrealism is different from the avant-garde movement in a sense that it transcends the avant-garde. Andre Breton, the forerunner of Surrealist philosophy, wrote "Let us not mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful" and it has been driven by the same philosophy ever since. Influenced by the study of dreams and the unconscious by Freud and Jung, the surrealist group believed in the future resolution of the two states of dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a 'surreality', if one may so speak.

The interpretation of reality or our perception by the Surrealists is most striking. In the first Manifesto of Surrealism, Breton defined Surrealism as psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of the mind. The surreal film unites the spatial elements of image and the temporal elements of narrative in a discourse that deconstructs the usual function of each. Cubism, which was studied before Surrealism, tried to deconstruct spatial existence of visual images. Surrealism, instead, pretends to create the illusion of space and then suddenly turns around and shows that a surreal object now occupies the same real space.

Georges Melies, David Wark Griffith, Carl Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein (of the 'Battleship Potemkin' fame), Stan Brakhage, Michaelangelo Antonioni etc were the trailblazers of avant-garde moviemaking. Stan Brakhage, perhaps the most prolific and masterly of them all, used unique narrative styles in most of his movies. For him the color and method used to film a movie was not a means but an end in itself. His movies are true approximations of his dreams and visions. They portray how difficult seeing is to the trained adult eye.

In his own words in an interview, hypnologic vision is what you see through your eyes closed -- at first a field of grainy, shifting, multi-colored sands that gradually assume various shapes. It's optic feedback: the nervous system projects what you have previously experienced -- your visual memories -- into the optic nerve endings. It's also called closed-eye vision. Moving visual thinking, on the other hand, occurs deeper in the synapsing of the brain. It's a streaming of shapes that are not nameable -- a vast visual 'song of the cells expressing their internal life. Peripheral vision is what you don't pay close attention to during the day and which surfaces at night in your dreams. And memory feedback consists of the editing of your remembrance. It's like a highly edited movie made from the real.

Most of Brakhage's movies are without sound. The movie creates a rhythm of its own and it hijacks the visual senses to such an extent that there is actually no need for a auditory distraction. Most of his techniques, like his mastery of the hand-held camera, painting on the film-strip, physically inserting tiny images on the reel (like in his masterpiece 'Dog Star Man'), scratching the film surface to leave marks and in the movie "Moth Light" even inserting dead moths between film rolls to create the true illusion of light through the wings of moths: were not only unique but also were aimed at exploring human subjectivity in all its varieties. His feelings and emotions are as closely duplicated on reel as possible.

The most well known of the surreal movies is the 'Un Chien Andalou' or 'An Andalusian Dog' directed by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali. The movie is full of surprises and imagery straight from the dreams. In one sequence, a woman approaches a cyclist and looks in turn at what he has in his hand. Close-up of the hand,

the middle of which is teeming with ants swarming out of a black hole. None of these falls off. It dissolves to the armpit hair of a young woman sprawled on the sand of a sunny beach. It again dissolves to a sea urchin whose spines ripple slightly. It dissolves to the head of another young woman in a powerful overhead shot framed by an iris. The iris opens to reveal the young woman surrounded by a throng of people who are trying to break through a police barrier. At the center of this circle, the young woman, holding a stick, attempts to pick up a severed hand with painted fingernails that is lying on the ground. A policeman comes up to her, sharply reprimanding her; he bends down and picks up the hand, which he carefully wraps up and puts in the box that was carried by the cyclist. He hands it all to the young woman, saluting her in a military fashion while she thanks him. As the policeman hands her the box, she appears to be carried away by an extraordinary emotion that isolates her completely from everything around her. It is as though the echoes of distant religious music enthralled her; perhaps music she heard in her earliest childhood.

Unfortunately most of the movies by Brakhage, Bunuel and other experimental filmmakers are no longer available off the counter. Most of them are available only from online stores; if you are lucky enough you might pick up a copy of “By Brakhage: An Anthology” a collection of 26 of his selected movies released in May 2003 around the time of his death. But the fact remains that even though most experimental films are not very big commercial successes, they not only are comparatively cheap productions but also raise the standard of the moviemaking art as a whole. The complex narrative/story of an avant-garde movie coupled with the uncommon and unsettling styles used by the masters is often too much for the average moviegoer to handle. Yet these movies are necessary as they set trends. Experimental movies, by definition are an experiment, an effort to push human imagination and narrative styles to the very brink and try to erase the thin line between reality and fiction. Most of the styles developed by the avant-garde and surrealist movies are used in commercial movies in small and diluted doses: in fact studies in cubism and montage has influenced most of the movie effects and music videos that we see around us. Without the boldness of the experimental movies, most of these areas would have remained unexplored.

The Assamese movie directors can perhaps be inspired by these masters to invest more effort in experimental movies which might even raise the standard of international movie-making rather than trying to imitate the sleazy Bollywood commercial movies which invariably result in disasters due to financial constraints.

- *Contributed by Syamanta Saikia*

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Feedback

Namaskar!

The ASA newsletter posted at Assam.org. I found the newsletter to be very interesting – we here can really come to know the minds of our brothers & sisters in a far-away place– what they are doing/thinking/talking about.

Of particular mention is the concern by you all about development in Assam - in what way can you all contribute. I found the viewpoints of all the writers are those of serious people, thinking seriously about transforming the situations prevailing here.

*Prasanta Boro
Dy. Manager, (IS) IOC (Assam Oil Division),
Guwahati, India*

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Thanks for sending this to all of us.

The editorial about AASU's role is great. This issue mainly consists of articles with suggestions on what could be done for Assam. A few of these projects are being done, some thoughtful suggestions are in.

We can all pitch in and make things better as we all want to see our birth-place to be a prosperous one - to see our near and dear ones back home living in peace and comfort.

An excellent issue of a publication that includes some of the most important factors that concern Assam - it makes the best sense in having this name of an organization - "Assam Society of America".

After all, the long term and the "real" purpose of an organization is for the development of all kinds - to the "main" interests of its people, and seems like ASA is going to that direction as usual.

With best wishes,

Alpana B. Sarangapani
Houston, Texas, USA

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Obituary: Late Mahendra Narayan Dutta, father of Satyajit Dutta, NJ, USA, and Prasannajit Dutta, NF, Canada, passed away on December 2nd, 2003 in his Guwahati residence, leaving behind his wife Gyanada Dutta and three daughters. He was 74 years. People who met him once remember him for his amicable nature and simple nature. May rest his soul in peace.

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ASA Newsletter is a monthly email newsletter, posted during the first week of every month. We invite contributors from all over the world. Your valuable feedback, comments & suggestions; and of course news from your part of the world for inclusion in the coming editions are highly appreciated. Mantu Baishya of Omaha, NE, on behalf of **Assam Society of America**, is the publisher of this issue of the ASA newsletter. **Assam Foundation of North America (AFNA)** also sponsors the newsletter. The editors are Satyam Bhuyan (Ames, Iowa), Ganesh Bora (Manhattan, Kansas), Babul Gogoi (Guwahati, Assam), Jugal Kalita (Colorado Springs, Colorado), Shymanta Saikia (Wichita, Kansas), Santonu Goswami (El Paso, Texas) and Vavani Sarmah (Secane, Pennsylvania). We are seeking a few additional members to sit on the Editorial Board. The responsibilities include writing occasionally, editing submissions, collecting contributions and disseminating the newsletter to a wider audience. If interested, please contact email: asanewsletter@assam.org or asanewsletter@yahoo.com.

This newsletter can also be read online at <http://www.assam.org/newsletter>
If you want a printed copy of this newsletter, please contact us at the email address given above

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